

Writers Workshop: The Craft of Writing

By Grant Farley

The Workshop Process: Before reviewing the Writing Workshop below, read the guide included at the end of this document, which is full of useful tips for conducting successful writer's workshops.

Overview

This is part of a series of five lesson plans designed for use as a writer's workshop. Teachers of creative writing, composition, A.P. Language and American literature courses will find these lesson plans particularly useful. However, there is enough flexibility built in to allow the plans to be adapted for other classes as well.

These lessons will cover all three aspects of a high school literary study -- "into, through and beyond." However, the greatest emphasis will be on "beyond" as students apply what they learn about the craft of writing to their own work.

Each lesson focuses on developing students' abilities with respect to several writing techniques. We employ passages from key literary masters as examples. With the exception of Mark Twain's **Huckleberry Finn**, the lessons highlight authors and works that are presented in the AMERICAN COLLECTION. Below is a summary of the writers, works and techniques that are covered in the lessons:

Author	Work	Technique
Langston Hughes	<u>Cora Unashamed</u>	Diction, voice
Willa Cather	<u>The Song of the Lark</u>	Imagery, tone
Mark Twain	<u>Huckleberry Finn</u>	Irony, satire
Tennessee Williams	<u>The Glass Menagerie</u>	Dialogue
Henry James	<u>The American</u>	Syntax, point of view

Note: The plan that you are reading now is for "Cora Unashamed." Click on the titles above to access the other writers' workshops.

Suitable for: High school students of creative writing, composition, A.P. Language and American literature

Objectives

- Understand the use of diction and voice in a literary work
- Effectively utilize diction and voice in own work
- Learn and follow the rules (methods) necessary for a constructive workshop environment
- Gain a greater appreciation for literature as a craft

Skills Attained

- Critical reading
- Effective writing

- Giving and receiving positive constructive criticism

Lesson Outline

I. Introduce or review the following literary terms:

- Diction
- Narrator
- Persona
- Point of view (first, second, and third)
- Voice
- Tone

II. "Cora Unashamed"

A. Reading and Comprehension

1. Give students background information about Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance.
2. Have students read the story with an "eye" (and "ear") toward the literary terms reviewed in part I.
3. It may be necessary, prior to a study of the craft of writing, to get students past the emotional impact of the story. Certainly, discuss the issues of racism and abortion as they relate to this story. However, since this is a workshop on craft, it is necessary to direct the conversation toward the writing process. One effective segue is to steer the discussion about racism in the story to the eighth paragraph that begins: "Cora was the oldest of a family of eight children—the Jenkins niggers. The only Negroes in Melton, thank God!"
4. Ask students the following questions about the passage:
 - A. Without looking at the story, tell me if it is told in 1st, 2nd or 3rd person?
 - B. If there was some hesitation or discussion as to what the point of view is in the story, why was it unclear to some people?
 - C. Is it possible for a work written in the 3rd person to have a voice that is distinct from the author's voice? Discuss the term persona. It may be helpful to bring in another story by Hughes, such as "Thank you, Ma'am" for a comparison of 3rd person voices.
 - D. Look at paragraph 8 (the passage cited in A.3). Why does the narrator use the word "nigger" in the first sentence and "Negroes" in the second sentence? What does this say about the narrator's attitude (tone) toward his subject? Do you think the choice of these two words reflects Hughes' views? Or, has he created a person different from himself to tell this story?
 - E. If students have already covered dramatic irony and or **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, you may ask the students if there is a difference between the use of "nigger" in that work versus this one. Of course, the issue of a white versus black author will be noted. However, also ask if the fact that Hughes uses the word in the 3rd person narrative voice while Twain has it spoken by fictional characters makes any difference either to the tone or impact of the term.

B. Follow Up Exercise

1. Have students write and then share with the class the following assignment:

Using specific word choices, descriptions and passages from "Cora" as evidence, create an imaginary characterization of the narrator of this piece. For example: Is it male or female? Black or white? Young or old? Big city or small town? Educated or uneducated? Northern or Southern? Angry, bitter, ironic, joyful, sad, hopeful.....what? Is it Langston Hughes?

III. Writer's Workshop

Note: See the document titled The Workshop Process for a recommended structure.

A. Writing Assignment

Now that students are familiar with point of view and persona, have students attempt the following writing assignment:

Persona and P.O.V.

1. Create a persona that is significantly different from yourself. In a paragraph, describe that persona. Give the persona a name, background, personality, diction, attitude, etc. **Do not show your persona to anyone!**
2. Observe (or imagine) an interaction between two people. (While you may wish to brainstorm this with a group of classmates, it is more effective to make your observations outside of the classroom environment.) What would your created persona's attitude be toward the people and situation that you've observed? Write a narrative or description of the interaction **in third person**, but from the point of view of your persona. In other words, your work should reflect the diction, knowledge, and attitude of your persona, not you.

(Teacher's Note: As an added inspiration, you may ask students to find a picture of their persona in a magazine. Have them tape this picture to the wall (or desk) in front of them as they write.)

B. Workshop

1. In a roundtable workshop discussion format, have students share their work from the assignment. It is best if they read their work aloud. However, copies could also be distributed and read silently.
2. Review the ground rules for appropriate behavior and commentary while a work is being "workshopped." The workshop process is a good source for this.
3. Each student should attempt to recreate the persona of the narrative voice of their piece. They should cite specific examples to back up their view.
4. Ask each student to read the description of their persona to see how closely the workshop presentation reflected this persona. If the student used a picture, he/she can show it to the class.
5. To follow up, have students exchange "personas" (it could be fun if this was done at random). Have students re-write their piece from the point of view of this different persona. Remind them that they are to stay in the third person; it is easy to slip into first person in this assignment.

Assessment

Teachers may set up their own rubrics for assessing student writing and workshop participation.

Suggested Related Works

Any one of the other four works listed in the overview section of this document can be used in place of "Cora Unashamed" for this workshop. Additionally, Steinbeck's **Cannery Row** provides an excellent example of a distinctive narrative voice.

Grant Farley teaches at San Pedro High School in California.

The Workshop Process

By Grant Farley

The workshop process outlined below has been developed by a wonderful writer and teacher, Jerry Hannah, through the "Asilomar Writers' Consortium (Conspiracy)."

Overview

The following workshop structure was created for adult, experienced writers. It can, however, be modified successfully for a variety of classroom situations, including creative writing, composition and A.P. classes at both high school and community college levels.

An ideal workshop would involve less than ten writers. Since this is often unrealistic in the public schools, you should explore strategies for keeping the workshop at a manageable number. Here are three possible solutions:

1. Use a "concentric circle" or "fishbowl" seating arrangement where the inner circle workshops while the outer circle observes and takes notes.
2. Break the class into several groups in the same room, making sure that each is monitored very closely. (This would be the least desirable alternative since it places you outside of the workshop.)
3. Combine classes with another teacher; while one of you takes a larger number of students in a lecture format, the other teacher may take a smaller group through the workshop format.

Although rationale is given for some of the following information, this has been pared to a minimum for the sake of brevity. The methods listed here have been honed over many workshops and proven effective over and over again. Please trust that these guidelines work and try them exactly as stated below before questioning or modifying the procedure.

Workshop Guidelines

1. No one is allowed to enter the sanctity of the workshop who does not fully participate in the rite.

It is crucial that no one be allowed to critique a work unless that person exposes him/herself to the same perils. Furthermore, people who don't honor the readings of others don't get the privilege of reading themselves. This includes the workshop leader.

2. The writer/reader makes no disclaimers, apologies or explanations about the work to be read.

The only appropriate introductory remarks are those that give pertinent background information not contained in the reading. (For example, if the middle of a short story is being read, it might be acceptable for the reader to give the workshop a very brief summary of the beginning.) More often than not, introductory comments only serve to reveal problems in the piece that will soon be revealed anyway.

Many novice (as well as veteran) writers feel anxious prior to reading. They experience a need to gain sympathy through explaining, apologizing or discounting their own work. The workshop leader should try to calm the reader. But, at the same time, the leader should press the reader "to get on with it."

3. The writer reads his/her work aloud to the group.

While reading aloud may seem time consuming, it is crucial. The process of reading aloud to a specific audience forces the writer to confront problems in the piece that are otherwise overlooked. Frequently, a writer will have an epiphany about his/her work even as he/she is reading aloud. This is true no matter how many times the writer may have gone over the piece alone. For these reasons, only in rare cases, such as laryngitis, may the writer designate a substitute reader.

Although the leader may stipulate that the writer provide copies in advance to the workshop, this is by no means a requirement for a successful workshop. Many very effective workshops are run solely on the basis of an oral reading. However, it may help less experienced listeners to have a copy to follow.

A page or time limit is a good idea, particularly in a larger group. However, some flexibility should be given in deference to the creative process. Still, the leader and the reader should keep in mind that the quality of the group's critique drops off markedly if the reading becomes too long.

4. Immediately after reading, the writer listens "in vegetable silence" and may take notes.

Under no circumstances should the writer/reader be allowed to engage in any discussion, debate or explanation during this part of the process. He/she must simply absorb the comments and take notes. If necessary, the leader may allow "yes or no" questions to be asked and answered. Any longer responses by the writer/reader must be saved until the end of the workshop.

5. Workshop members critique the work one at a time in a prearranged order.

If there is an unwieldy number of members, the leader may wish to explore these two alternatives:

- a) Break into two (or more) workshops. However, do not shuffle members between the workshops.
- b) Do not have every member comment on every piece. You could either have a set rotation or the leader could pick at random. Those not chosen to comment on a particular piece can add their "essential" comments at the end, in writing or after the workshop.

6. Rules to keep in mind while "critiquing"

The workshop leader may wish to have a written copy of this section for each group member.

- Attempt to balance specific comments between what "works" and what "needs work" in a piece. It is important for a writer to hear what "works" not merely to soothe his/her damaged ego, but also so that in those later moments of lonely revision, the author will not excise the strengths along with the weaknesses of the piece.
- Do not ramble.
- Focus on the craft.
- Do not interpret.
- Avoid comments that begin "I think this is saying..." etc.
- Do not rewrite. Let the writer know what needs "fixing," but do not offer suggestions about how to fix it.
- If you agree with an observation already made, briefly reiterate the point, but don't dwell on it. It is helpful for the reader/writer to hear a point several times. Writers are a

stubborn lot, and sometimes we need to be told several times before we realize our precious baby needs changing.

- Do not critique a critique. If you disagree with a point made by a previous workshop member, briefly state your point and go on.
- Do not feel you have to make every single point. Your critique is often more effective if it focuses on a few important details. Chances are, if something you left out truly is an important point, another participant will bring it up. If not, there will be time afterwards.
- Avoid ulterior motives in your critiques. Watch out for those comments that make you look especially clever or that elicit a laugh.

7. Listen carefully to all the other critiques.

Inevitably, the problems occurring in another piece will appear in your own work. Listening and absorbing critiques of other work is the single most important part of the learning process.

8. The workshop leader facilitates the process.

Periodically remind members to keep their comments brief, specific and to the point. (If rambling is a persistent problem, the leader may wish to impose a time limit on each critique.)

Remind the reader/writer to maintain "vegetable silence."

Do not allow members to speak out of turn.

If there were specific elements of craft that prompted the assignment for the workshop, the leader may wish to encourage the workshop members to focus on those elements. The leader may also need to periodically remind members of this goal.

Moments of humor can help ease tension and bond the group. However, humor that is disparaging of any piece of writing or of any group member should never be tolerated.

9. The workshop leader does the final critique.

The workshop leader must abide by all of the above rules. Modeling the critical process for the other workshop members is as important as the critique itself.

10. The reader/writer thanks the workshop and makes a short response to any points in question.

Some pieces will generate a lot of excitement. While the group will want to keep talking and debating the piece, remind them that it is time to go on.

Additional Note:

The leader must be an adult, experienced workshop participant. A workshop is a serious endeavor fraught with many perils. The most well-intentioned groups can be damaging if not done properly. Avoid student led workshops, however gifted the student leader may be. In fact, the most gifted student can do the most damage, accidental or otherwise.

Grant Farley currently teaches at San Pedro High School, California.